Men voelt het of men voelt het niet

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In twentieth century cultural life in the Netherlands, Jan Engelman was an outstanding figure. Although a Roman Catholic, he by no means confined himself to Catholic circles and in the field of art he was widely informed. He himself attached the greatest importance to his poetry, but we know him not only as a poet, but also as a critic and journalist, as chairman of the Utrecht artistic society Kunstliefde, as professor of art history, an organizer of exhibitions and as a member of countless advisory committees. Engelman was an ambitious man and he undoubtedly loved power. He was often in a position to pass verdicts and with reference to art he did so with an extraordinary idealism based on his Catholic faith.

For Engelman, the qualitative improvement of Catholic art was an important aim. He usually considered Catholic artists and writers as second-rate and he tried to educate them with art from outside the Catholic world. But although he himself had an open mind with regard to neutral art, for many Catholics this proved a bridge too far. His plea for aestheticism and his desire for co-operation with people of other persuasions were frequently frowned upon by his fellow Catholics. The fact that he disapproved of a good deal of Catholic art and often used neutral art as his standard turned him into a pariah in Catholic circles. And because in neutral circles he met with distrust on account of his Catholic background, he came to occupy an awkward position between the various divisions.

Engelman’s special position in the interbellum days became especially apparent within the context of the literary magazines of the time, in which he manifested himself as an intermediary between the various parties. By the end of 1924, together with a number of other Catholic young men, he had dissociated himself from the Catholic magazine Roeping to found De Gemeenschap in Utrecht. In less than a year, however, Engelman was set on joining forces again and aimed at the largest possible concentration of Catholics willing to co-operate with people from other denominations in literary magazines.

He initiated several magazines, as for example with Gerard Bruning, Marsman and Slauerhoff in 1926, with the authors of De Vrije Bladen, Forum and Het Venster in 1933 and in 1937 he made plans for De Harp together with A. Roland Holst and Nijhoff. Engelman continually attempted to bridge the differences between the various factions and tried to assume a leading role. Even so he failed to achieve his main goal, leading a so-called ‘Christian-pagan’ magazine. Among Catholics he was virtually the only person with this ambition. He counted some literary friends among the neutral writers, such as Marsman and Van Vriesland, who were willing to co-operate with him, but prominent figures like Ter Braak and Du Perron kept their distance from Catholic circles generally and, consequently, also from Engelman. They regarded his Catholic background as an obstacle and would not accept his leadership. Ironically, his very attempts at reconciliation placed him in an isolated position. For Catholics, he remained a renegade who made common cause with heretics while the leaders of Forum kept seeing him as a Catholic applying for a papal seat.

Still, an open-minded attitude like Engelman’s was by no means unique in Catholic circles. Between 1900 and 1925 there had been progressive Catholics who were willing to learn from non-Catholic art. Around 1900, to extend one’s view from Catholic examples to the non-religious Tachtigers was a principle embraced in circles.
of *Van Onzen Tijd* by such authors as M.A.P.C. Poelhekke, A.M.J.I. Binnewiertz, C.R. de Klerk and Maria Viola.

Because of their broad-minded attitude, the writers of *V.O.T.* were much more of an example to Engelman than Pieter van der Meer de Walcheren, who is usually presented as the chief source of inspiration for the young people of *De Gemeenschap*. Like Engelman, Van der Meer de Walcheren was critical of Catholic art. But he did not dare to admit the influence of neutral art and even disapproved of contacts with members of other persuasions. Clearly, Engelman’s attitude towards co-operation with non-religious artists was a much more positive one. What he did share with Van der Meer de Walcheren was a deep-seated dislike of Protestantism.

It is possible that Engelman was influenced by the ideas of Maria Viola or C.R. de Klerk, but he himself regarded the French philosopher Jacques Maritain as his foremost example. To Engelman, Maritain’s axiom that God does not demand specifically Catholic art came as a motto of liberation. Similarly, Maritain’s plea for craftsmanship, originality and innovation in art came as an important support for his own views on the subject.

The fact that Jan Engelman was able to reconcile his religion with his appreciation of paganist artists sprung from his conviction that aesthetic art is by definition subservient to the Catholic faith. According to Engelman, religious contents were not conveyed by means of an apostolic message, but through experience of beauty. The work of art that gratifies the senses represents the future paradisiacal state, thus strengthening the faith regardless of the aim or denomination of the maker.

Beauty, in Engelman’s view, could only be perceived intuitively. It was only when he was moved by a text, a piece of music or a painting that there could be beauty. The process was not wholly beyond analysis, for Engelman related the experience of beauty to certain aspects of form which he wanted to recognize in all disciplines as equivalents of the invisible or supernatural. Thus he attached the same importance to spatiality and plasticity in painting as he did to the ornamental in architecture and the main melody in music, or sound and rhythm in poetry. Engelman could be called a formalist, as long as it is remembered that he looked upon these formal means as instruments to reveal the divine. Engelman’s conception of art was therefore directly subservient to man’s ultimate destiny.

Just as his conception of art was a matter of religious idealism, for Engelman criticism, too, served a sacred purpose. Writing art reviews was by no means noncommittal. It should be founded on an ideal and the critic was expected to subordinate art to it. Art criticism was not primarily intended to clarify the artist’s ideas, but rather to promote the personal ideals of the critic. Engelman’s reviews, therefore, are not so much concerned with the art he discussed than with the formulation of his own metaphysical view of beauty. The ideal also justified all sorts of strategic interventions, such as presenting a one-sided view of an oeuvre by magnifying religious characteristics, or providing metaphysical or Catholic interpretations of certain stylistic features. In art and artistry Engelman was continually in search of elements that allowed of Catholic interpretation, then magnifying them while at the same time trivializing features opposed to this. Strategic writing and the manipulation of art and artists were methods he frequently used in his reviews and which he himself looked upon as perfectly legitimate.
The necessity of strategic writing was not equally urgent in all disciplines, but it most definitely was in the field of literature. As a rule, Engelman considered Catholic men of letters too emphatic in their message and their language too clumsy to allow of any experience of beauty. Non-Catholic writers such as Slauerhoff, Marsman and Henriette Roland Holst were more capable of doing so, but were written towards the Catholic faith by Engelman.

In architecture, he was faced with a similar problem. In Engelman’s view, Catholic architects could not be said to be truly contemporary. Thus he campaigned against the neo-Gothic and neo-Roman buildings by Cuypers and Kropholler propagated in the Katholiek Weekblad. On the other hand, he expressed in his admiration for the architecture and the interiors by Sybold van Ravesteyn, even though the latter was not a Catholic. Van Ravesteyn’s creations bore the signature of constructivism, but at the same time they were elegant and ornated, so that Engelman was able to interpret them along Catholic lines by placing them in old Catholic-inspired building styles such as Gothic and Baroque.

In the field of visual arts, Engelman found art to his liking both within and without Catholic circles. He enjoyed the simplified, realistic style of southern Catholic painters. He acted as their promotor, wrote positive reviews in the national press and organized their exhibitions. But painters from Limburg and Brabant, such as Wiegersma, Eyck and Jonas, were not particularly popular in the regions north of the major rivers and by supporting them, Engelman did not manifest himself as a prominent and progressive art critic. Conversely, these Catholic artists had no great understanding for Engelman’s preference for the painters of Magic Realism, like Pyke Koch. In fact, it was only in the field of music that religious sectarianism in the arts presented few problems for Engelman. His admiration for Catholic musicians Alphons Diepenbrock, Matthijs Vermeulen and Hendrik Andriessen was no source of embarrassment in neutral circles.

In his denominational views on art Jan Engelman was a typical representative of artistic criticism during the interbellum. ‘Within the denomination-based culture of the interbellum years critics defended their own values, passed explicit judgments and engaged in polemics with their fellow critics in the newspapers’, Nel van Dijk characterized the critic between the two world wars in 2003, and Engelman perfectly fits the description. He enjoyed the written debate, defended subjectivity in art criticism and set no great store by any objective approach.

One of Engelman’s opponents in the realm of art criticism was the Utrecht professor of art history Vogelsang, when the latter had taken up writing newspaper reviews. The fact that a professor of art history should be involved in criticism was, for Engelman, in itself a dubious matter, for he himself felt better equipped to pass subjective judgments than a scholar who carried the burden of his knowledge. For Engelman, Vogelsang was not a critic, because he had no predilection for any particular style in art and could not make ‘spontaneous and one-sided’ choices.

To Engelman, neutrality was equivalent to ‘indolence’ and ‘abstinence’, which served no purpose for art. He believed a critic should not veil his affinity or dislike for a work of art, and consequently his own reviews were pointedly phrased. In this respect he differed from critics like A.M. Hammacher. Unlike Engelman, who voiced his appreciation or disapproval in a vehement and personal manner, Hammacher as
a rule avoided any confrontation. The difference between the two critics had also been noticed by R.N. Roland Holst in 1936 and he preferred Hammacher’s attitude to Engelman’s. His characterization of the latter as a ‘party man’, who made both art and artists subservient to his own interests was sharp, but not unjustified. He never thought Hammacher as presumptuous or offensive and he valued him for his mild understanding of art. Engelman himself had no great admiration for Hammacher’s unpolemic approach. In fact he thought of him as a conformist, who lacked outspokenness, one who in the twenties took over Bremmer’s preferences and after World War Two slavishly followed progressive museum directors such as Sandberg and De Wilde. Much later Cees Straus, too, wrote about Hammacher in Engelman’s vein. In an undertone of criticism he typified Hammacher as someone who had not responded to art with in ‘highly personal views’ and who, as a critic, had been a ‘follower’. As stated earlier, it was in his reviews that Engelman proposed his own ideals. He employed a fixed set of standards a work should meet and he thought in terms of sharp contrasts. Metaphysical art was pleasurable to the senses, ornamental, melodious, with warm colours, elegant lines and often related to the Catholic south. Opposed to it was an art that was not metaphysical in the sense of referring to a future heavenly state. It was well-reasoned, dogmatic, programmatical, calvinist and was typical of the more rigid north. In Engelman’s view, the music of Wilem Pijper was rational, and antithetical to Alphons Diepenbrock’s celestial sounds. He juxtaposed the warm glowing, liberal glass painting of Limburg-based Joep Nicolas to the restrained, rational figures in the windows of R.N. Roland Holst. He preferred the elegantly ornamented designs of Van Ravensteijn to the pure geometry of De Stijl. It was the pure lyricism, the playful children’s language of Van Ostaijen that evoked religious feelings within him, and not the slightly harsh verses by Van Duinkerken, even though the latter was a Catholic and Van Ostaijen was not.

Both within and without Catholic circles Jan Engelman was respected for his knowledge in the field of art. However, his views were controversial and his artistic choices came in for a good deal of criticism. Opinions of his art criticism can partly be traced back to the specific character of society in various periods. Thus the reception of Engelman’s concepts of art and art criticism during the interbellum was mainly determined by religious divisions. What it came down to was that his fellow Catholics did not think him Catholic enough because he had made paganist art his standard, while in the acceptance by members of other denominations his Catholicism sometimes proved a stumbling-block.

During the post-war years, too, the political and cultural climate was not altogether favourable for Jan Engelman. In literature, for example, he failed to connect to the new generation of writers, and showed but little appreciation for the Vijftigers. He believed their poetry was not original, because in his view they merely elaborated on the achievements of poets of his own generation, the ‘experimentalist of thirty years back’. ‘Everyone who is at all informed, be it ever so little, is aware that the Vijftigers did not appear out of the blue, that they as much rehash our dishes as their friends in painting and sculpture. I can see only one among them who is truly committed to poetry, Lucebert, but I hope for his sake that he will soon revert to a more normal syntax.’

In his ideas on urban building, too, Engelman did not conform to established opinion. In the period of post-war reconstruction he wanted to protect ancient city
centres by excluding modern traffic and opening up the cities on the fringes only. Engelman’s ideas were to become fashionable again towards the end of the twentieth century, but when in 1958 he spoke out against urban innovation in Utrecht and opposed the filling of the city canals, he was out of touch with public opinion and he was branded a medieval moralist by the press.

Finally, the type of art Engelman preferred fell out of public favour after the war. During the twenties he had concluded that abstract art did not serve religious purposes, and this view did not change when after 1945 realist art came to be associated with the German invaders and it was abstraction that gained in popularity. Unlike Sandberg and Hammacher, who kept a close watch on recent developments in art, Engelman remained faithful to realism. In the press he expressed an unchanging enthusiasm for the romantic realists from the south of the country, for Magic Realists such as Koch and Willink, and for the new group of realist painters (which included Wijnberg, Kerpershoek, Van Norden) who published the magazine *The Realist*, to which Engelman made an important contribution in 1951.

On the basis of his Catholic faith, Engelman continued to support for the same type of art, irrespective of prevailing opinions. As a result, his ideas were frequently ill-timed and he was looked upon as a conservative critic. In later art historical literature, too, Engelman has been taken to task for his unfailing preference for realism. Doris Wintgens Hötte claims that after the war Engelman turned conservative, evidently basing her view on the choices of museum directors like Sandberg, De Wilde or Hammacher, who propagated abstract art. In the days after World War Two, modern art became synonymous with non-figurative art. Engelman, on the contrary, also regarded mimetic art as modern. It did not constitute its mainstream, but was a sideline which, in his opinion, merited attention and which he himself propagated.

Jan Engelman has written about a good many subjects and many themes have been dealt with in the course of this book. Nevertheless, some have been passed over. Thus little attention has been paid to his views on religious art, of which we know he often believed it to be lacking in sensuousness and liveliness. Also Engelman’s views on dance and the theatre, on which he wrote reviews for *De Nieuwe Eeuw*, deserve closer attention. Moreover, a sequel study is desirable to place Engelman in the line of art critics of the previous century, such as Plasschaert, Hammacher, De Gruyter, Doelman, Wentinck and possibly others.